DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 212 374 PS 012 639

AUTHOR Robbert, Lois
TITLE Bringing Preschoolers and the Institutionalized Elderly Together: How One Program Works.
PUB DATE 81
NOTE 15p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cooperation; Grandparents; Group Experience; *Older Adults; *Preschool Children; Preschool Education; Program Descriptions; *Program Development; Quality of Life; *Social Development; *Social Values; *Values Education
IDENTIFIERS *Intergenerational Programs

ABSTRACT

In developing an intergenerational program bringing together preschool children and elderly adults in a retirement home/geriatric center complex, preschool staff had to discard three misconceptions. It was initially supposed that the elderly would like to visit the nursery school. It was assumed that people in the retirement home have nothing to do. Finally, it was anticipated that arranging programs with another institution would be easy. Experience revealed that is was better to take the children to visit the home-center than to depend on the elderly to visit the preschool, and that controlled group activities that work well in preschool, such as art, music, and storytelling activities, were usually successful when provided for mixed groups of elderly adults and preschool children. Events such as walking through the home and greeting residents and one-on-one contact over a box containing objects which could be talked about proved effective. Values realized by intergenerational programs concern the process of transmitting values and attitudes, building human relationships, meeting childhood needs (such as acceptance and self-esteem), socializing the children, and, possibly, enhancing intellectual development. (Author/RH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Lois Robbert
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ED212374

PS012639

Bringing Preschoolers and the Institutionalized Elderly Together: How One Program Works

By Lois Robbert

Visions of grandmothers in rocking chairs offering unlimited lap-holding and love come to mind when people mention intergenerational child care programs. What actually happens when a nursery school is housed in an institution for old people?

For six years a preschool near Los Angeles has operated in a retirement home-geriatric center complex. The children of Trinity Lutheran Preschool regularly visit residents of Southland Lutheran Home and Geriatric Center, either as a class activity or in small groups to "make a visit." Just a few of the residents visit the school.

The concept of the school was originally a vision of the architect (whose wife is an early childhood educator). With the children in such close proximity to the elderly, relationships were planned to develop, formally or informally. In describing the patterns of interaction that have evolved, it is important to go back and examine the misconceptions that the staff had to put aside before the program became successful.

Misconceptions

Misconception 1: That the elderly would like to visit the nursery school. A preschool is a noisy place, filled with vigorous movement on the part of young children. Some old

people cannot hear well, and extra noise does not go well with hearing aids. Many old people are fragile and fearful of falling, and are concerned about children darting in front of them and knocking them over. Out of a population of 200 retired persons, only three or four have ever been happy about spending time in the school. A retirement home, of course, has a less physically able population than the community at large. Old people who are still vigorous may enjoy being with young children in groups.

Misconception 2: That people in a retirement home have nothing to do. One of the most difficult parts of scheduling a program with old people is trying to find time in their day's activities. In addition to having medical appointments and becoming ill, residents have full agendas each day, ranging from sewing, movies, bingo, coffee hours and birthday parties, to hair dressing appointments and unexpected visitors. Even when these people do set aside time to be with children, they may become forgetful and wander away from their rooms, not to be found until the time for activities is past. "Forgetitis" is a big problem.

Misconception 3: That it will be easy to arrange programs with another institution. A good preschool operates on a flexible, open basis and is used to improvising. Staff members by their nature are warm and giving toward all human beings. The staff of a geriatric center, based on a medical model, is likely to be more rigid and formal. Working with this kind of staff requires extra effort in spelling out plans and goals.

While the preschool functions with one thought in mind--what is best for the children?, the geriatric center must focus on what is beneficial for its residents. Often these two needs are not mutually agreeable. For instance, what is best for the child is an one-to-one relationship with an older adult, which means limiting the number of adults who may participate with the children. But what is best for the older person is to have exposure to the children as frequently as possible. This often results in pressures from the geriatric center to stage "performances" rather than developing personal relationships.

So having residents come to a preschool is not satisfactory; old people are hard to pin down; and working with geriatric staffs presents problems. What does work in an intergenerational program, and what are the benefits to the children?

What Works?

What does work well between the two groups is almost everything that is successful in a preschool. When our staff began taking a class of twelve children over to the retirement home, and had them stand around a big table, always between two older people, magic began to happen.

Almost all standard preschool art projects, from play dough to finger painting and collage, interest the old people as well as the young. The abilities of the person well past seventy to cut, draw or paste are like the abilities of the young child--some can, some can't.

Music also has universality. Songs from the old days--"Old McDonald Had a Farm" and "Row Row Row Your Boat," as well as

from the new--"It's A Small World After All" are sung with enthusiasm by both groups. A tune that gets total response from the older participants is "Jesus Loves Me."

Story telling by a teacher, with flannel board or puppet, holds the attention of both groups. Games that require responses make a hit with the seniors. A variation of "fish" has a child and a resident "fish" for questions to answer: "What is your favorite food? Do you have any brothers and sisters? Have you ever ridden a horse?" Picture lotto games require cooperation--one board shared by a resident and a child--and result in intimate involvement by the two groups.

At Thanksgiving time one teacher took her class to visit a group of senile residents. She had a large picture of a farm and colorful pictures of individual foods. The picture of the farm was no sooner propped up on an easel than a resident said happily, "Oh, I know what that is!" and proceeded to tell the children about the hay loft and the pastures and the function of the cows. The children looked at her in amazement.

When it came time to talk about the foods that are eaten at Thanksgiving, the teacher passed out the picture cards, and each child was told to show his cards to one resident. The children then became so excited by the first conversation that they went to every resident to show their cards. A babble of happy voices demonstrated that here were two groups of people, at the opposite ends of the life span, that were thoroughly enjoying each other.

A special unit on "Olden Times" has further drawn the two ages

together. Based on a project done at the University of Oklahoma, the curriculum theme draws from the turn of the century, when people rode in horse-drawn carts and read by lantern light. Residents were able to demonstrate to children how to make butter and bread, as well as talk about things they saw in old pictures.

A special hit was a box filled with old artifacts: a razor strap, ice tongs, antique reading glasses, a stereoptic viewer, and an ancient doll. A child would take something from the box and give it to a resident, who would describe how the object had been used. For the children, it was an introduction to history; for the residents, a revival of happy memories.

While much of the programming between the preschool and the home or geriatric center involves taking a class to the home for a scheduled visit, other meaningful encounters take place informally.

Some residents simply enjoy looking at the children, and those whose rooms face the play yard will sit in their wheel chairs and watch "Live TV" for hours on end. On special holidays, the children go singing through the halls, distributing a Valentine or a card or door decoration they have made. Some residents will invite children into their rooms (which the children are delighted to inspect). Other residents will just wave from their doors.

Simply walking through the home to meet with the residents has become an event in itself. Going down the hall is like visiting in a small town, with old people coming out in the hall to smile,

wave, or talk briefly with the children. Each week, more doors are open, and teachers and children learn to address the residents by name. "Hello, Anna, it's nice to see you today;" "Good morning Mrs. Taylor, isn't it a beautiful day? We are going to sing in the dining room--please come with us."

A most successful program has been carried on by one resident, a former school teacher. For many months this woman came to the preschool, sitting in a corner of the room and reading to the children for the better part of an hour. Children with even short attention spans like to listen to Mrs. Franze for many long minutes.

When this resident's health failed and she was physically unable to come to the school any longer, she missed the children, and so each afternoon she invites two or three of them to come to her room. They visit with her and listen as she reads. When it is "Mrs. Franze Time" the children anxiously demand that they want to go to her room this day--but there is a long waiting list, and they have to learn to take turns.

With a few residents, a "Pink Box" club has been successful. One child is selected to visit one resident, and because a child needs something to do when he goes visiting, he takes along a pink box.

The box is filled with small things to talk about, feel, look at, and a book. One resident and her child have become such friends that their scheduled twenty minute visit has stretched out to an hour and a half. "We talk like little old ladies," says the resident. The child and the older person are totally absorbed in each other during this time.

Residents who are able to participate in the pink box club are limited. People who move into institutions are usually forced to do so because of failing health. Many of them, surprisingly, never had children of their own. At Southland, the average move-in age is 82 years. This is frequently a deteriorated 82, so that many residents lack either physical, mental, or social capabilities of interacting with a child.

For this reason, the preschool staff came up with a revised program--a "Basket of Books" club. Children and available residents meet in a large, sunny room, where staff is available for assistance. Each resident reads to one or two children. This arrangement is more flexible than the pink box club--a missing grandparent will not disappoint a child, and staff can oversee all the children in one room. Whether faces are old and wrinkled or young and fresh, both seem to enjoy being together and sharing the pages of a book.

In addition to reading, the kinds of curriculum that might be designed for intergenerational programs seem almost limitless. Specific goals will shape the program: Does the activity provide one-to-one interaction? Is there an opportunity for both generations to build self-esteem by responding in a positive way, either socially, verbally, or through art or music? Are old people allowed to revive happy memories, and are young children presented with a positive view of aging? Is the resident always treated with dignity and respect?

In looking at the environment in which the activities take place, it is necessary to consider that the older people be in

a familiar setting that offers them feelings of security. At the same time, they need to have an opportunity to see and touch the children.

Children need to move around, yet seem able to stand for twenty minutes or so next to a resident's wheelchair without tiring. Of the two groups, the children are far more adaptable to different environments.

Values of Intergenerational Programs

What values does an intergenerational program offer? Why have this kind of program? The 1967 Plowden report (Silberman 1963) says that a school is not merely a teaching school; it must transmit values and attitudes. Certainly there is no better way to improve society's values and attitudes toward the aged than by exposing young children to old people, and letting them know that the old are people who care, who will listen when you talk, who look at you with admiring eyes.

The person who defined ageism in America (Butler 1975) wasn't present the day a loved resident of the home appeared on a patio facing the preschool yard. "Olga, Olga!" screamed the children, and dropped their play to rush over to where she stood. White hair, wrinkles and a bent-over body did not prevent these children from appreciating the warmth and love that old age has to offer.

Another value of this kind of program is building human relations. According to Hendrik (1975), a good preschool program "is built on the foundation of sound human relationships and must

include numerous opportunities for person-to-person, one-to-one encounters". She adds that children learn to value others when social concern and kindliness are part of the curriculum. By focusing on relationships with adults outside the school, it is possible to build adult-child relationships and have one-to-one encounters to an extent not possible with a usual teacher-child ratio.

Altruism aside, bringing young children and older people together meets a number of emotional and social needs for the young child. Montagu (1970) has described the human need for touching for survival. The brain itself has a wide band for tactile stimulation, more than twice as big as the combined area for visual and auditory stimulation, so the need to be touched is a strong emotional need in young children.

With few adults in a young child's life today, the task of the school in planning for children to give and receive affection becomes more important. While good schools have always favored hugs and lap holding, there is an extra amount of this kind of attention when you bring older adults into the program.

You see wrinkled hands reach out to touch a child; a senile woman smiles as a child leans against her knee for half an hour; an old couple beam with pride as they each hold a young child on their laps; and a woman sits for half an hour with her hand across a child's back, as the child stands and draws a picture beside her. The very act of touching is an affirmation--I care

about you, I acknowledge that you are my fellow human being.

Another emotional need met by these encounters is acceptance. Young children want to be acknowledged for their qualities of their own imperfect, immature selves. Parents make a lot of demands and expectations, while grandparents are inclined to be totally accepting. The manner of a grandparent says, "You are a child, I admire you and like you for your childlike qualities. I accept your youngness, that is why I am attracted to you. I like your imperfections--they make me laugh and forget myself."

Unconditional positive regard builds self-esteem, and the lonely old with time on their hands give a high quality of acceptance to the young child. A pediatrician said, My young patients are under such stress. I always recommend grandparents to help calm them, relax them, and ease their suffering." This ties into another of Hendrik's preschool goals, the need to nourish and sustain emotional health.

Socialization is another benefit of this kind of program. The young child is experimenting with social relationships. At four, he has stopped treating his companions like objects, and now becomes involved with friends on a cooperative basis. A good preschool program will teach children to relate to different social groups. The young child's world is expanded as he finds extra adults in his life with whom to talk and share activities.

A child can experience and make sense out of society only as he encounters attachment and friendship. (Damon 1977) While

social learning theory has viewed the child as passively absorbing socialization, Piaget (Flavell 1963) tells us that it is interaction that builds socialization. The child constructs his social knowledge from his own unique experience.

Experiences with a wide variety of people used to be found within the family setting, but in our mobile society, the extended family is apt to extend across the country. Here in an intergenerational program are great-grandparents that most children would never otherwise have a chance to visit. Few families with young children "go visiting" anymore. Many do not have time nor relatives to visit. In this kind of program, the child is making a call, saying "How do you do?", responding to questions, carrying on an independent conversation, and is growing in the process.

One reason young children get along so well with older adults is that they have no preconceived idea of what people should be like (Damon 1977). To a young child, friends are people who live near you, or with whom you temporarily need to be playing. Young children do not comprehend a person's internal thoughts or feelings: hence, they do not evaluate them, or like or dislike them. On meeting a new person, a young child is not thinking in terms of marriage, socio-economic status or political views, so he is much more accepting of the new person than an adult would be.

Programs between the generations may also enhance intellectual development. Piaget says that childhood egocentrism is a result of adult constraint. When the child is able to establish a genuinely mutual contact with the adult, he is able to escape

from his own ego and learn more about how others view the world.

Growth in the young child also occurs through adaptation. The child needs to be able to change as he confronts differing circumstances. Being with old people for an hour requires different skills on the part of the child. He will have to speak distinctly, and explain things to an older person that a peer might take for granted.

A concept of time and the life span also results from such a program. A young child's world is often limited to the day care center, his home, and perhaps the grocery store. If he has grandparents, they may be in their forties. Most young children do not have really old people in their lives. If a child learns the single concept that old age has a value, the program has been of great worth.

In all societies in the past the old have been involved in the care of the young, but in our throw-away society, we have isolated these ages from each other. This has been part of the "Old age doesn't matter" syndrome. But Erik Erikson has said that unless all ages of the life cycle have value, life itself has no value.

Here is an opportunity to instill the worth of old age in the very young. One mother said, "Why is it that when I take my child shopping, he insists on stopping and visiting every old person he sees?" Another child reported excitedly to his parent, "Guess what I got to do in school today? I got to

visit the grandparents!

A cornerstone of all childhood programming is the need to teach the child to be kind and value all other people. And the cornerstone of childhood development says that the child must be near the old person, hear him read a story, touch his hand; understand that in his feebleness he cannot get out of his wheelchair; feel the pleasure that his presence brings to the old person: understand that this is old age, and that it is good.

References

Butler, Robert N., Why Survive? Being Old In America, New York: Harper and Row, 1975.

Damon, William, The Social World of the Child, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1977.

Flavell, The Developmental Psychology of Jean Piaget, Princeton, N.J.: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co., 1963.

Hendrik, Joanne, The Whole Child, Saint Louis: The C.V. Mosby Company, 1975.

Montagu, Ashley, Touching, New York: Columbia University Press, 1971.